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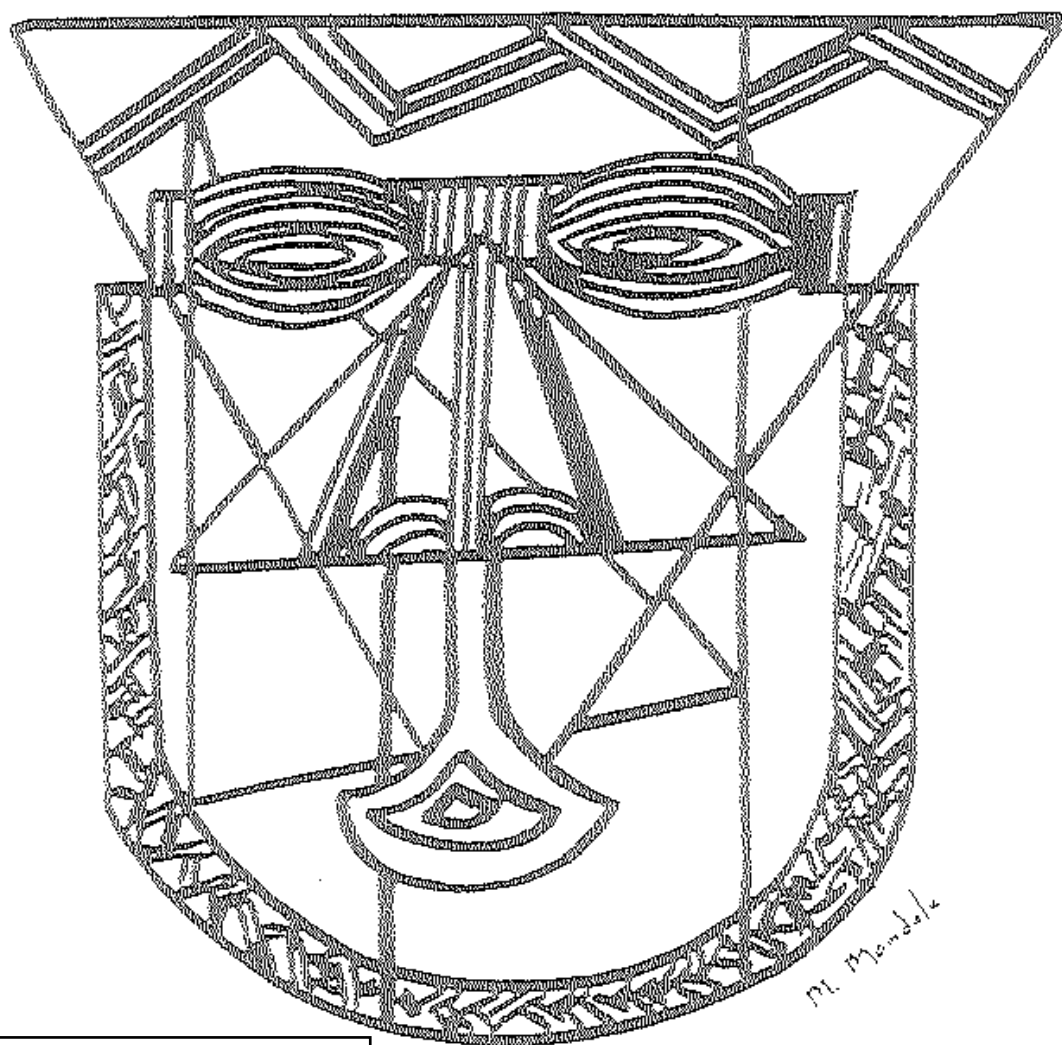
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WESTERN CIVILIZATION

AFRICA OR GREECE

WHOSE LEGACY?

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POINT/COUNTERPOINT

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REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN EDUCATION¹

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One of the great ironies of history is the complete reversal of the fame of African education. For more than 4000 years of the 5000 year historical time period, African education was considered by most educated persons to occupy an exemplary status. It has actually been only about 250 years that the opposite opinion has been current. In this paper I would like to briefly trace the history of that change and to explore its implications for the crisis facing contemporary education, especially in the United States.

African Education in the International Opinion of Antiquity

Let us first consider the traditional reputation of African education. Homer's high regard for the Ethiopians and Herodotus' admiration of the ancient "black skinned" and "curly haired" Egyptians are well known (Homer, 1989; Hansberry, 1974; Herodotus, 1987; James, 1976; Diop, 1974; & Bernal, 1987). Plato's evaluation of ancient Egyptian culture provides a clear insight into the impact of African education on ancient Greece. In his penultimate work, the *Timaeus*, Plato sets Solon, the wisest of the legendary Greek sages, at the feet of Egyptian professors who instruct him in the history of antiquity (Plato, 1949). In two of his other post *Republic* works, Plato attributes the invention of writing and

literacy to the ancient Egyptian god Jehewty, the model for the Greek god of wisdom, Hermes (Plato, 1982, 1985). In his last major work, the *Laws*, Plato throws subtlety to the wind and openly praises the Egyptian systems of education in the disciplines of music, art, arithmetic and astronomy. Concerning teaching music he said:

...the law...in Egypt...[The state of things is] worthy in the highest degree of a statesman and legislator....To effect this would be the task of a god or godlike man (Plato, 1960).

Equally compelling is his comment about the Egyptian method of teaching arithmetic:

...one ought to declare then, that (our) children should learn as much of these subjects as the innumerable crowd of children in Egypt learn along with their letters...when I was told...of our condition in regard to this matter...I was ashamed, not only of myself, but of all the Greek world (Plato, 1960).

In other words, the educational reform outlined by Plato in his *Republic* was later revealed to be based on a model of African education.

Aristotle, Plato's critical student, echoed this appraisal when he admitted that the Egyptians invented the mathematical arts, one of the three theoretical sciences (Aristotle, 1941) and the master technology, political science (Aristotle, 1962). This high opinion continued throughout Greco-Roman antiquity. Writers from Socrates to Diodorus and Plutarch repeated this theme (Socrates, 1986; Diodorus, 1989; & Plutarch, 1984).

The fame of African education was international in antiquity. The ancient Jewish scribes in constructing their history wrote much about Egypt and Ethiopia. In attempting to con-

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vey the magnitude of Solomon's sagacity, one text proclaims, "Solomon's wisdom excelled...all the wisdom of Egypt" (I Kings, 4:30). A thousand years later when Stephen was trying to explain the traditional continuity of Jesus' doctrines to a hostile mob of conservative Jews, he said: "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7, 1:22).

The intellectual regard for ancient Egyptian learning proceeded into the modern period of history. Francis Bacon, the prophet of experimental science, in the early 17th Century wrote that the ancient Egyptians not only excelled the Greeks in science but also recognized the priority of science over politics in the hierarchy of human achievements (Bacon, 1955). A century later Isaac Newton, the idol of early modern science believed:

The Egyptians were early observers of the heavens and from them...philosophy was spread among other nations...and...from them...the Greeks; a people more addicted to the study of philosophy than nature derived their first, as well as soundest notion of philosophy (Newton, 1960).

But it was the French intellectual, Count Volney, who after traveling throughout the lands of tricontinental antiquity a few decades after the intellectual reversal of Africa's reputation had begun, brought into focus the historical irony which provoked this essay. He said:

A people, now forgotten, discovered while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences. A race of men now rejected from society for their sable skin and frizzled hair founded...those civil and religious systems which still govern the universe (Volney, 1890; emphases added).

The contradiction that Volney highlighted cannot be ignored in the present day war over the African centered curriculum.

The tradition of African education which has inspired and instructed so much of the world also flourished throughout much of Africa. Kush, from whence Egypt received its civilization, was also the legendary model for Egyptian education. After the decline of ancient Egypt, Kush (present day Sudan) maintained pharaonic civilization for another thousand years. The Axumite Kingdom also produced a rich educational tradition. Christian Nubia which replaced Kush also continued Africa's investment in education. The core of West African Civilization during the Middle Ages and early modern period was education as evidenced by the University of Sankore at Timbuctu.

These implicitly African centered educational systems produced more than 200 generations of educated men and women who built pyramids from Giza to Meroe and temples from Axum to Jenne; wrote medical and surgical journals; developed mathematical formulae; produced a profound body of literary and philosophical texts; and who wisely governed much of the world inside and outside Africa for thousands of years.

The Impact of African Education on European Education

The influence of African education on Europe is not only general and inspirational as has been implied by its intellectual reputation, it has also been direct and specific. The modern European curriculum is a descendant of the ancient Egyptian educational tradition. The modern western tradition of liberal arts is an expansion of the Latin educational tradition of the Trivium and the Quadrivium. These in turn grew out of the Greek educational process which borrowed heavily from the ancient Egyptians (Hilliard, 1986).

The Trivium which includes rhetoric, grammar and logic came to the Romans from the Greeks who merely revised the ancient Egyptian master discipline *Medew Nefer* or "Good Speech." Plato's attribution of literacy and writing, the pillars of good speech, to the Egyptians is evidence of the Greek recognition of this influence. The biblical image of Moses as "mighty in words" because of his Egyptian education is another support for this conclusion. Indeed rhetoric, grammar and logic are all aspects of good speech. Rhetoric is concerned with convincing or persuading argumentation; grammar with the correct construction of speech; and logic with reasoned speech.

All of these are embodied in the concept of "Good Speech" first articulated by Ptahotep in his instruction 4400 years ago (Carruthers, 1986). He introduced his teaching as a "discourse on Good Speech" (Carruthers, 1986). It was a model for good speech not only in the normal grammatical and rhetorical senses but also in the substantive moral and philosophical senses. For the ancient Egyptians (or Kemites as they called themselves) good speech was not only the aim of education but also the method; in other words, education was the teaching of "Good Speech" through good speech. This tradition of "Good Speech" was the essence of Egyptian learning that inspired the Greeks to abandon the "inspired" speech of the poets and turn to "logos" or reasoned speech which is a pale reflection of *Medew Nefer*.

Egyptian influence on the Quadrivium is even more apparent. In the literature of classical Greece, there is universal acclaim that the mathematical sciences were invented by the ancient Nile Valley dwellers. Plato's praise of the Egyptian method of teaching arithmetic and astronomy states our case. His suggestion that the Egyptian laws concerning music education were, perhaps, instituted by a divinity is the highest honor ever bestowed by Plato.

The Western curriculum in the 19th century relied heavily on this old Trivium-Quadrivium curriculum core. Grammar

and rhetoric and logic were quite widespread as subject titles until quite recent times. They are still taught as hidden subjects in English and speech courses. Logic of course is still a celebrity subject at the core of the discipline of philosophy and is indeed generally a synonym for reason itself throughout the curriculum. Thus, the entire range of core disciplines in the modern curriculum was first authored by the ancient sable skinned, frizzly haired Africans. This is properly the context from which Volney reflected. The irony is that a century before the classical curriculum began its final revision in the 19th century, Africa's foundational role in the development of Western education was generally recognized by educated Europeans. How did this reversal of fortune occur?

The Great Books and the Curriculum of White Supremacy

The modern classical curriculum is epitomized by the publication of *The Great Books of the Western World* (1946). The volumes which comprise the set are portrayed as "The Great Conversation" and "The Great Ideas." *The Great Books* begin with the works of Homer and end with Freud. The 443 texts were authored by men who lived in various European countries and several regions colonized by Europeans, located in Africa and the western hemisphere. Not included in the published volumes but included in "The Great Conversation" and the "Great Ideas" is the *Bible* which contains texts presumably authored by Western Asians. Implicit in the chronological range of texts is the notion that the pillars of the "Western World" are the scribes, prophets and scholars of the ancient Judeo-Christian and Greek traditions.

The Great Books of the Western World, as a project apparently, is a revision of *The Harvard Classics* first published in 1907. *The Harvard Classics* which replaced the rigid classical curriculum of the 19th century, include texts from cul-

tures other than those controlled by European intellectuals. Included in the set are "Sacred Writing" from Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and "Mohammedan" sources. The geographical and cultural scope of *The Harvard Classics* while wider than *The Great Books* nonetheless was exclusively Eurasian and excluded texts from that part of Africa not colonized by Europeans at the time the texts were authored. The omission of African texts from both canons of European education and literacy is significant in light of the general fame of African intellectual contributions prior to the 18th century. Many texts from the ancient Nile Valley civilization and the early period of Ethiopian history were available for inclusion.

The editors of the two canons of Western education were distinguished and learned intellectuals. The general editor of *The Harvard Classics* was Charles W. Eliot, professor and president of Harvard University. Robert M. Hutchins was president of the University of Chicago and editor of *The Great Books of the Western World*. The associate editor of the project, Mortimer J. Adler, was a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. Certainly these scholars and intellectuals were aware of the Nile Valley connection; the University of Chicago was the home of the Oriental Institute, where individuals were pioneers in the area of translating and working-over ancient Egyptian texts. We may conclude that the omission was not accidental or due to ignorance.

Since it was impossible for the "great thinkers" from Plato to Augustine to omit references to the texts and teachings of Egypt, what accounts for the great excision by these 20th century educators whose projects were designed to cultivate the intellects of a wide Western public? The only possible answer is that such a mutilation of intellectual history was dictated by the philosophical doctrine of white supremacy. This is the context in which we identify the broad Western course of education as the curriculum of white supremacy.

The curriculum of white supremacy was necessary for the creation of the condition which was asserted as the foundation of white supremacy. Since white supremacy did not exist, a curriculum was devised to bring it about. Therefore, the premise had to be taught not only to Europeans but to everybody else, especially Africans. In other words, the curriculum was designed to erase a significant portion of world history.

Like the 20th century canons, *The Harvard Classics* and *The Great Books of the Western World*, the doctrine of white supremacy was crafted by great and influential Europeans. In fact, the basic statement of the fabricated convention was articulated by four of the philosophers whose works are included in *The Great Books of the Western World*. Indeed the philosophy is originally spelled out in one of the "greatest" of the great books, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. In book XV, Volume One of that work, Montesquieu formulates the problem thusly:

Were I to vindicate our right to make slaves of the negroes, these should be my arguments:

The Europeans, having extirpated the Americans, were obliged to make slaves of the Africans, for clearing such vast tracts of land.

Sugar would be too dear if the plants which produce it were cultivated by any other than slaves.

These creatures are all over black, and with such a flat nose that they can scarcely be pitied.

It is hardly to be believed that God, who is a wise Being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in such a black ugly body.

The negroes prefer a glass necklace to the gold which polite nations so highly value. Can there be a greater proof of their wanting common sense?

It is natural to look upon color as the criterion of human nature.

It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christians (Montesquieu, 1956, pp. 38-39).

Montesquieu thus crafted a doctrine of African inferiority evidently in order to rationalize 300 years of the exploitation of Africa and its peoples principally through the European slave industry. This rationality was placed by Montesquieu in the context of a theory of social evolution. Montesquieu felt that there were three stages of socio-cultural development that all human societies travel. The lowest is savagery, the second, barbarism and the highest, civilization. Only Europeans had reached the highest level. Therefore they were authorized by history and nature to force the lower and slower societies to accelerate their progress through exploitation if necessary. In this regard he focused on Africa:

The greatest part of the people of Africa...are savages and barbarians...They are without industry or arts.... They have gold in abundance which they receive immediately from nature. Every civilized state is therefore in a condition to traffic with them to advantage, by raising their esteem for things of no value, and receiving a very high price in return (Montesquieu, p. 332).

This philosophical invention was refined by another author of two "great books" one of which attempts to explain away the apparent historical contradiction to the concept of innate African inferiority, i.e., the ancient Nile Valley civilizations of Egypt and Ethiopia. In the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel offers the following solution:

[The Negro in Africa] Exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state...there is nothing

harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character (*The Philosophy of History*, p. 93).

He further concluded that the condition of Africans "is capable of no development or culture" and that enslavement to more advanced Europeans is necessary to the "increase of human feeling among the Negroes" and is an advance toward "becoming participants in a higher morality...a phase of education" (Hegel, 1956, p. 93).

At this point we leave Africa not to mention it again. For it is not a historical part of the world; it has no movements or developments to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European world. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to its western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the world's history (Hegel, 1956, p. 99).

Hegel's solution to the embarrassment of ancient Egypt was simply to remove Egypt from Africa and Africans from Egypt. But more importantly was his judgment on African culture which he asserted was no part of history. In other words, Hegel attempted the great intellectual crime of *Historicide*, the destruction of a people's history. In accepting this proposition, many European historians and intellectuals began to teach a mutilated and deformed world history. Such mutilation finally resulted in such projects as the Great Books which epitomize the curriculum of white supremacy.

The Crisis of Education in the 20th Century U.S.A.

One final touch had to be added to the classical curriculum of white supremacy and that was a European designed and guided curriculum for Africans. Such a project was undertaken in the last years of the 19th century. The epitome of that project was "The Mohonk Conferences on the Negro Question" held in 1890 and 1891 (Barrows, 1969). Participants included leading white educators (several college presidents attended), representatives from missionary societies, directors of philanthropic foundations and other distinguished European Americans. The keynoter and chairman of the conferences was Rutherford B. Hayes, a former president of the United States. Ex-president Hayes painted a picture of the "ancestors of ...the [Negro] population as barbarians and pagans of the lowest type" (Barrows, 1969, p. 10). Based upon this view of African peoples, slavery was deemed a step up the ladder of civilization. In order to complete the ascent to the level of civilization, the conference adopted a platform which was designed to "supply teachers and preachers for the Negro race" (Barrow, 1969, p. 109). These African leaders were to be "educated" in "common English studies and in the English Bible" (Barrows, 1969, p. 109). Africans in the United States were thus to be deprived of any knowledge of the role of Africa in world history.

The resulting system of Negro education controlled by whites is the basis of the current crisis in education in the United States. The curriculum philosophy of Negro education was developed in the context of the segregation system with its *de jure* form in the southern states and its *de facto* form in the rest of the country. That system of apartheid was given its constitutional approval five years after the second Mohonk Conference. The *Plessy v. Ferguson Case* which authorized the states to enforce a system of racial separation

as the lawmakers deemed appropriate was identified by the lone Supreme Court justice who dissented. Justice Harlan chastised the majority by asserting that they were allowing the states to institute a system of inferiority on the African population. He objected to a legal or *de jure* system of white supremacy, but he made the following argument:

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty (Plessy, 1896).

Thus, Harlan argued for a color blind constitution. He assured the whites that *de facto* white supremacy would continue under the ethos of "American civilization." This part of the opinion was generally overlooked by the supporters of desegregation. But it formed the implicit core of the post *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Brown, 1954) crisis.

The Brown case was the Supreme Court case that resulted in the overthrow of segregated education. Such a decision had been the objective of the civil rights movement for several decades. One of the major reasons for widespread support for the decision among European American educators was the fact, revealed through research, that the system was causing dangerous resentment and rebellion among the masses of "Negro children" (Carruthers, 1994, p. 49). The apartheid system was also an embarrassment to the United States at the international level during an era when the decolonization movement among Africans, Asians and other oppressed peoples was gaining ascendancy.

The arguments and decision in the Brown case largely skirted the real issue of white supremacy and focused on the tangential issue of racial isolation. The court accepted the

following chain of cause and effect: (1) segregation is racial isolation; (2) racial isolation causes feelings of inferiority in "Negro children;" (3) inferiority feelings lead to low motivation; (4) low motivation leads to low achievement or inferior results for the "Negro" children. Thusly reasoned, racial isolation became the problem and white supremacy ducked out of sight. What remained intact after the Brown decision was a *de facto* white supremacy curriculum.

The disastrous crisis of education which followed Brown had at least three major components. One was the continuation of inferior educational results for Africans. A second aspect of the crisis was the abandonment of public schools by millions of white children thus isolating whites in pursuit of non-integrated education. A third component of the disaster was the demand for "Black Studies," first at the college level and later throughout the public secondary and elementary schools (Carruthers, 1994, pp. 49-50). These three outcomes severely damaged the white supremacy curriculum which had been the *de facto* foundation of black and white education for two centuries.

The "Black Studies" movement developed in the wake of the Black student movement which began on February 1, 1960. The implicit target of the battle for Black Studies was the overthrow of White Studies (T'shaka, 1982, p. 17). The Black Studies movement spawned demands for ethnic studies and women studies as well as anti-establishment studies in general. As a result the curriculum of white supremacy was substantially wrecked. The multicultural education campaign was launched largely in order to salvage as much white supremacy as possible. This latter development has been under attack from the staunch, stand pat defenders of Western Civilization (white supremacy), even as the multiculturalists wage war on the African centered education project, which is carrying forth the struggle started by its predecessor, the Black Studies movement.

In the meantime, some of the "powers that be" are attempting to end the war through privatization of education. After all, privatization was a refuge for missions of white families threatened by desegregation-integration. White supremacy isolated and protected itself under such circumstances. Thus, privatization is now a major battle line in the educational wars. The struggle to re-establish Western education in the 1990s is reminiscent of the efforts to establish "Negro" education in the 1890s. Thus the challenge facing African educators as we enter the 21st century is symbolized by Hilary Teague, the Liberian poet of the 19th century:

*From pyramidal hall,
From Karnac's sculptured wall,
From Thebes they loudly call—
Retake your fame*

—Jacob H. Carruthers
Winter, 1995

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